

Leading from Within: Developing a Professional Portfolio for Inclusion in the Early Years

A Celebration of Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme Graduates and their Inspiring Contributions to the Lives of Children and Families



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“The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers.”

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) 2015, p. 1.

Dedication

This publication is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Seona Stapleton and Margaret Joyce, women of remarkable strength, warmth, and wisdom, cherished friends and colleagues. Their kindness, guidance, and presence touched our lives in many ways. Though deeply missed, they continue to inspire and guide us throughout the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme.

We also remember with heartfelt gratitude the family members, friends, students, and graduates who are no longer with us. Your contributions are not forgotten. You live on in the work we do, in our conversations, and in the moments, we continue to share.

This LINC Portfolio Publication stands as a tribute to your enduring presence and the meaningful impact you have made.

A Note on the Authors

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Shirley Heaney is a Lecturer in the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. She was formerly the National Coordinator of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme from 2021–2024. During this time Shirley was responsible for the national management of the LINC and LINC+ CPD Programmes. Shirley worked with the LINC Programme since its inception in 2016 in a variety of roles, including module content development for both the LINC and LINC+ Programmes; Programme delivery; quality review; evaluation and management. She has extensive experience in the area of inclusive practice in early childhood and has published in this area. Shirley’s research interests include inclusive practice, child well-being, universal design and professional development.

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Claire Butterly is the National Coordinator of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme and a passionate advocate for inclusion in early childhood education. With a career dedicated to supporting the rights and needs of all children, she has held diverse roles including tutor, Early Years Quality Mentor, and Lead Content Developer. From 2016 to 2022, she played a key role in tutoring and delivering the LINC and LINC+ CPD Programmes. Claire is currently pursuing a PhD at MIC, focusing on Level 7 of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). Her work is driven by a deep commitment to building a more inclusive, equitable early years sector.

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Ann Donnellan is the Lead Academic Tutor on the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme., where she mentors and supports early years professionals in creating inclusive, empowering learning environments for all children. She holds a BA in Montessori Education and a Master's in Adult and Further Education. Deeply committed to professional development in the sector, Ann played a key role in designing content for the LINC+ CPD Programme. She co-developed the Level 8 Special Purpose Certificate in Professional Mentoring for Early Childhood Practice and co-authored Professional Mentoring for Early Childhood Practice (Springer Nature, 2023). She also contributed to Leading Inclusion from the Inside Out (Peter Lang, 2021).

Paula Harte

Paula Harte is a Tutor on the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme and has worked on the Programme since its inception in 2016. Paula has over 25 years' experience working in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector. She holds a BSc (Hons) in Early Childhood Care, Health and Education, and a Master's in Early Childhood Education. Paula has contributed to both the LINC and LINC+ CPD Programmes. She possesses a wealth of knowledge in inclusive practice in the field of ELC and has published in this area. Paula strives to empower early childhood teachers in the promotion of inclusiveness in caring and welcoming ELC settings.

Linda Madden

Linda Madden is a Tutor on the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme, passionate about ensuring all children have access to inclusive early childhood education. With over 30 years' experience, she previously owned and managed a preschool setting that promoted high-quality, inclusive, outdoor, play-based learning. Linda holds a Teacher's Certificate in Further and Adult Education, a Diploma in Montessori Teaching, a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Care and Education, and a Master's in Inclusive and Special Education. She was part of the first LINC graduating cohort in 2017 and has contributed to the LINC+ CPD Programme. She has also completed the High Scope Implementation Course and earned several digital badges, including UDL, e-Moderating, and Teaching and Learning. Linda supports early years professionals in creating inclusive, empowering learning environments.

Margaret Joyce

Margaret Joyce was a deeply valued Tutor on Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme from its early days in 2016 until her untimely passing on October 17, 2022. Margaret held a BA in Early Childhood Studies and Practice (NUIG), a Master's in Child, Family and Community Studies (DIT) and a post-graduate qualification in Special and Inclusive Education (St. Angela's College, Sligo). Margaret's passion for inclusion and her belief in the power of early childhood education shone through in everything she did. She brought warmth, kindness, and wisdom to her teaching, and her impact reached far beyond the classroom. Those who worked with her remember her integrity, generosity of spirit, and ability to make everyone feel seen and valued. Her legacy lives on in the inclusive practices she inspired and the community she helped nurture. Margaret is fondly remembered and deeply missed by all who knew her.

Helena Thompson

Helena Thompson is the Marketing, Communications, and Recruitment Officer for the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme. Since joining in February 2023, she has led integrated marketing campaigns, leveraging digital and traditional channels to increase brand visibility and support recruitment. Helena holds an MSc in Digital Marketing Strategy from Munster Technological University (MTU) and a BA in New Media and English from the University of Limerick (UL). Additionally, she is certified in Universal Design and Digital Accessibility from Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and The Fundamentals of Digital Marketing from Google Digital Garage.

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- All LINC Programme staff who continue to support students' journey through the LINC Programme and LINC CPD Programme;
- The LINC Steering Committee with representatives from Mary Immaculate College (MIC; Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Maynooth University - Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education (MU - Froebel Dept.);
- The Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) for their support with the LINC Programme since 2016;
- The Graphic Design Company Spectrum Print Logistics Limited.

Glossary

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCDE	Department of Children, Disability and Equality
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DoH	Department of Health
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EYEPU	Early Years Education Policy Unit
FE	Further Education
Gol	Government of Ireland
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
IDG	Inter-Departmental Group
INCO	INclusion COordinator
LINC	Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MU - Froebel Dept.	Maynooth University - Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
UL	University of Limerick
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Terminology

Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings	Settings providing early education and care to children prior to commencing primary school adopted by the <i>First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028</i> (Government of Ireland (GoI) 2018).
Early Childhood Teachers	Staff working in settings providing early education and care to children prior to commencing primary school.
Early Learning and Care Practitioner	Terminology to describe early childhood teachers, adopted by the <i>First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028</i> (GoI 2018).

Introduction

We are delighted to document and celebrate the work of students who participated in the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme, specifically profiling their professional portfolios and highlighting their reflections and exemplars of best practice in leading inclusion in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings.

As well as profiling best practice in working with children who have diverse learning abilities and developmental profiles, it is our intention that *Leading from Within: Developing a Professional Portfolio for Inclusion in the Early Years* will serve as both an inspiration and a source of reflection for early childhood teachers to build their own professional portfolios as part of their ongoing process of professional development. For this reason, the publication is addressed to early childhood teachers directly.

Creating Inclusive Early Years Experiences for Children: The Irish Experience

The current focus on inclusion is often traced to the Salamanca World Conference Declaration Statement, which asserted the familiar principle that regular schools with an inclusive orientation were the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities and achieving education for all (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) 1994). What is less well known, is that the Salamanca Statement specifically referred to early childhood care and education, observing that:

The success of the inclusive school depends considerably on early identification, assessment and stimulation of the very young child with special educational needs. Early childhood care and education Programmes for children aged up to 6 years ought to be developed and/or oriented to promote physical, intellectual and social development and school readiness.

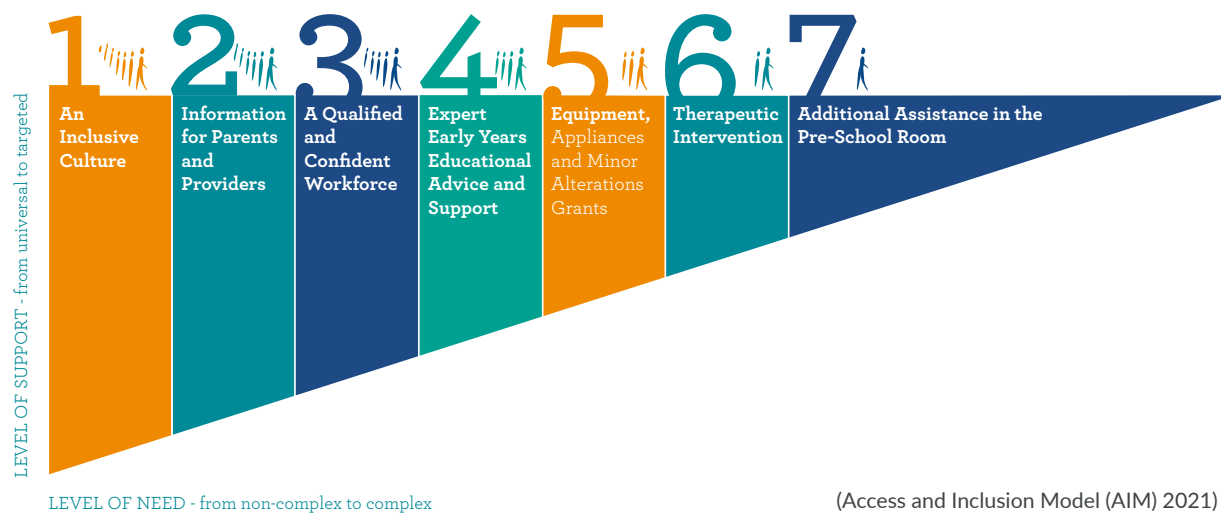
(UNESCO 1994)

Research from national and international perspectives has continued to highlight the benefits of high-quality early intervention in inclusive early learning and care settings to support the diversity of children's learning and development needs (Daly et al. 2016; Ring et al. 2021; Robinson et al. 2022; Ring and O'Sullivan 2019; Ring 2024). However, developing inclusive education systems across the continuum from early childhood and beyond is far from simple (Ring 2024; 2025). Inclusion emerges as a complex, multifaceted process influenced by a wide range of historical, political, economic, societal and global contexts (Ring 2024). While in 1994, Ireland was one of ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations subscribing to the principles of the Salamanca Statement, it has taken over twenty years for these principles to begin to be realised through the Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) 2015).

The IDG Report on Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability was launched in November 2015 (IDG 2015). This report provided for a new model of Government-funded supports aimed at enabling children with diverse learning and development needs to participate fully in free-preschool mainstream settings alongside their peers. AIM is a cross-departmental initiative, introduced by Dr. Katherine Zappone, T.D. on the 15th June 2016, led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and involving, *inter alia*, the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The model, which is based on national and international research evidence, was developed following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including parents. In accordance with best practice, the seven-level model, detailed in Figure 1. Below, adopts a child-centred approach through focusing on identifying and responding to each individual child's developmental level, abilities and needs rather than relying exclusively on formal diagnoses.

Figure 1: Access and Inclusion Model

A Model to Support Access to the ECCE Programme for Children with a Disability



The seven levels of support range from universal (Levels 1-3) to targeted supports (Levels 4-7) based on the needs of the individual child and are consonant with the key components of quality early childhood care and education (O'Sullivan and Ring 2023). While each of the levels is presented in the model separately, they are inextricably linked with each other.

Level 1 is described as the critical foundation for the model and advises that a strong culture of inclusion must be fostered and embedded to optimise each child's participation in the ECCE Programme. The concept of inclusion underpinning the model is described as referring to a process involving a programme, curriculum or educational environment where each child is welcomed and included on equal terms, feel they belong and can progress to achieving his/her full potential in all areas of development (DCYA 2016).

While the development of a national inclusion policy for ECCE is a positive development, it is essential that the local and wider community, parents, children and early childhood teachers¹ are supported in contributing to the culture of each individual setting in order to ensure that a unified approach to creating an inclusive culture is a central feature of practice. The effectiveness of *Level 1* is therefore closely related to the provision of information for parents and providers at *Level 2* and the necessity of developing a qualified and competent workforce that can confidently meet the needs of all children participating in the ECCE Programme at *Level 3*. A commitment to the ongoing evaluation of the AIM has supported the continuing improvement and development that remains responsive to evolving needs at macro, meso and micro-level policy implementation (LINC Consortium 2019; RSM 2019; Robinson et al. 2022; Cartwright et al. 2024; LINC Consortium 2024; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) 2024; LINC Consortium 2025). AIM is aligned with the vision of *First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland (GoI) 2018) and *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028* (GoI 2021).

The Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years Programme; An Overview

In 2016, a Consortium led by Mary Immaculate College (MIC), and including Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Maynooth University - Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education (MU - Froebel Dept.), was awarded the contract from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for the delivery of the National Higher Education Programme for Inclusion Coordinators in Early Years Settings. The Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme focuses specifically in facilitating the creation of a new role of INClusion COordinator (INCO) in each ECCE setting registered for the Free Pre-School Year (FPSY). Successful graduates of the Programme acquire an

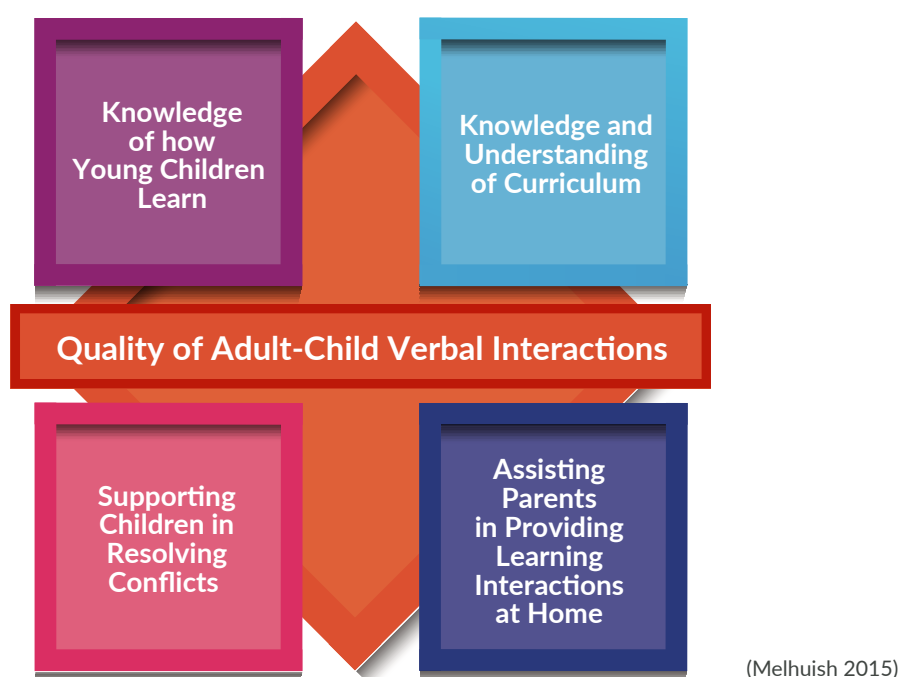
1. As noted in the Glossary, in this publication 'early childhood teacher' is used to refer to staff working in settings providing early education and care to children prior to commencing primary school. A measured decision was made by the authors to adopt the term 'early childhood teacher' in relation to the LINC Programme. This decision was based on John Dewey's concept of the 'teacher' as an interpreter and guide as the child re-enacts, rediscovers and reconstructs his/her experience on a daily basis. The authors believe that this term best describes the role of all of those who work with children in ELC services (Camp Mayhew and Camp Edwards 1936). However, the authors also acknowledge that terminology is inextricably linked to the wider issue of professionalisation, which remains outside its remit in the context of this publication.

NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications) Level 6 (Higher Education) Special Purpose Award from MIC, Limerick [University of Limerick], which enables them to successfully perform the role of INCO in an ECCE Programme setting.

The Programme, which is designed to provide for 900 students each year over a four-year period commenced in September 2016 and is delivered in nine regional centres in a blended format, comprising face-to-face classroom-based sessions and online delivery. In 2020, following the successful submission of a tender for a new Programme, the LINC consortium provided a new iteration of the LINC Programme², which was initially contracted from November 2020 to November 2023 and later extended to conclude in October 2025. A further iteration of the LINC Programme is due to commence in 2026.

The Programme is embedded in *Síolta, the National Quality Framework* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE 2006); *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009; Government of Ireland (Gol) 2024a; Gol 2024b), the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (NCCA 2015; Gol 2025); the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2016). The LINC Programme is embedded in best practice with regard to the indicators of high-quality ECCE in Figure 2 below. The Programme also maintains a particular focus on listening to and responding to the voice of the child.

Figure 2: Indicators of High-Quality Early Childhood Care and Education



2. Due to the restrictions necessitated by COVID-19, face-to-face sessions were replaced with online delivery.

The LINC Programme places the child at the centre, promotes the concepts of rights rather than needs; acknowledges that all children are creative individuals with their own ideas, abilities and unique way of understanding; views early childhood teachers as researchers, partners, nurturers, guides and co-learners and parents/carers as partners in their children's early learning experiences (LINC 2016-2025). In effect, the LINC Programme is designed to support early childhood teachers in creating spaces where diversity is the norm. The LINC Programme rejects the terminology of 'disability' in favour of 'difference' and subscribes to the concept of inclusion articulated by UNESCO (2005)

Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. ... [As such,] it involves a range of changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children.

(UNESCO 2005 p.13)

What is the Role of Professional Portfolios within Early Years Education?



What is the Role of Professional Portfolios within Early Years Education?

Professional portfolios provide a means of examining and understanding the personal process of professional growth, development and change. The process of building a portfolio can serve as a catalyst for new insights and learning at many different levels and create deeper connections between theory and practice. According to Jones and Shelton (2011):

Portfolios are rich, contextual, highly personalised documentaries of one's learning journey.... Portfolios represent connections made between actions and beliefs, thinking and doing, and evidence and criteria. They are a medium through which the builder constructs meaning, makes the learning process transparent and learning visible, crystalizes insights and anticipates future direction.

Jones and Shelton (2011, pp. 21-22)

By integrating and bringing coherence to the personal and professional experience of the early childhood teacher, portfolios afford opportunities to reflect on who we are, what we value, how we engage and how we can develop. Bonfield and Horgan (2016) observe that “preparing a professional portfolio involves interrogating your beliefs and practices in order to make explicit your tacit knowledge and assumptions” (p.53). Exploring beliefs and assumptions is particularly relevant when engaging with and contemplating leading inclusion as an INclusion COordinator (INCO).

Professional portfolios use evidence to substantiate reflections on the impact of formative experiences on personal beliefs and pedagogical practices, providing an opportunity to develop a coherent narrative of personal and professional learning. In other words, your portfolio not only records what you have achieved but also how you understood, evaluated and solved problems at particular junctures during your career. Hence, developing a portfolio affords an opportunity to record, preserve and present your professional practice, progress and achievement through purposeful reflection on selected aspects of your work and learning over time.

Reflections on Developing A Professional Portfolio: A Student's Perspective



Reflections on Developing A Professional Portfolio: A Student's Perspective

Working on my Portfolio within the LINC Programme turned out to be quite a journey. I was asked to gather evidence of inclusive practice, pedagogy and culture from within my early years setting. As I was going through my files, observations and especially pictures, I recalled all the wonderful experiences I have shared with the children and families in my service. I was reminded of the many fun moments children shared and of the families who were introduced to each other for the first time at my service and still remain friends. It was an emotional experience for me.

Recalling these moments brought me on another journey, one of self-discovery. From an early age, I always knew that I wanted to work with children, and as I started reflecting and writing up my Autobiography and Philosophy as part of the Portfolio, I discovered something about myself – I try to see each child for who they are and when I go through my journey with them I discover more about them. However, studying through the LINC Programme and learning more about child development and theoretical perspectives throughout the course, I learnt that in order to bring a child forward I must look at their ability, and most importantly I must open my mind to the additional support that they may need in order to be fully inclusive.

When it came to my Autobiography, I discovered how important it is to me to make a child feel welcome each day. Recalling my own start at 'big school', I have discovered why this is so important for me. My first day was daunting and I discovered, through this Portfolio journey, that this is why making a child feel welcome and comfortable each day is the most important part of childcare for me.

The experience of completing my Portfolio and studying the LINC Programme has given me much more than a recognised professional standing. It has given me pride, a sense of accomplishment and confidence. I am a better person having completed this Programme. I am more aware and conscious of who I am, of each child's learning abilities and I would like to think that I am a more supportive guide for families and for the people I work alongside.

Contributed by Ann McDonagh³

3. Ann's blog can be found here: <https://lincprogramme.ie/my-linc-journey-anns-story/>

Autobiography within Professional Learning



Autobiography within Professional Learning

A large portion of an early childhood teacher's day is spent focused on others, from creating play provocations to supporting and meeting children's needs, to navigating documentation and paperwork. In considering a social constructivist view of educator knowledge and understanding, early childhood teachers bring their prior knowledge and experience to new situations (Choi 2013). Therefore, the most meaningful learning comes from pausing and turning the focus to oneself and inwards. As part of the LINC Programme, students engage in a reflective journey while creating their portfolio in which they use their autobiography as a way to explore who they are as an early childhood teacher and how their personal and professional experiences shape their practice.

Autobiographical writing offers a space to pause, reflect and make sense of the many influences which have brought one to that point in their career. It is more than just listing achievements, or recounting moments, it is considering the values one holds, the challenges they have faced and the lessons that they continue to learn. Researchers such as Doecke (2015) have noted, telling our stories help us to connect personal insight with professional growth and in turn this builds a richer, more reflective understanding of what it means to educate and care for young children.

Autobiographical reflection makes space for emotion, memory, relationships and identity. It reminds us that learning doesn't just happen during formal or informal training, learning is ongoing, evolving, live and personal (Stearns and Guadalupe 2020). In the excerpts that follow, our learners have had the opportunity to step back and consider not only what they have learned, but also how and why. In doing so, it has grounded their professional development in real experiences with the sense of looking forward with a clear purpose, shaped by where they have been.

Autobiographical Excerpts

you're



Braver than you

BELIEVE, Stronger Than

you

THINK.

SMARTER

THAN

YOU

seem,



Autobiographical Excerpts

My first memories of wanting to be an early childhood teacher was playing “teacher” with my dollies and enjoying the feelings of educating, being able to inform and direct. The experience of placing my first child with a creche fulltime was significant in my journey to being an early childhood teacher. I wanted to know more about how children learn and develop. I started with a Foundations in Play course, and this ignited my thirst for more knowledge about what motivates and supports children’s growth and development. My further studies through the LINC Programme and my role as INclusion COordinator have shaped my approach to early childhood education. I critically reflect on how effectively I include children with additional needs, engage their families, and involve the wider community. I consider the way we set up our environments and learning experiences and question how we can work in a way that benefits all the children and families attending our early years’ service.

Sally Hartnett

As my career progressed, I have discovered that I am always developing professionally. Although my core mission has remained the same, my practice is ever evolving through how I support children and families through adapting our curriculum to meet children’s needs. With the reassurance of adult guidance, our children can strive through child led learning and everything that it has to offer. Upon reflection, I have uncovered that my calling is as an INclusion COordinator. I strive for best practice and improving the lives of children with additional needs. I look forward to where in my career LINC brings me and sharing my ever-growing knowledge with my colleagues and using it in practice with the children in our setting.

Katie Dee

I found great inspiration, passion and love for my job from the help, support, and enthusiasm from my employer. She is a strong positive and inspiring presence in the setting and her support has guided me in becoming an affective manager. She has a fond love of the outdoors and the positive impact it has on children’s development which I adore. From a young age, I always thrived in the outdoors whether it was playing with family or sports. I believe it is where I learned a lot as a child and developed a love of nature.

Ciara Donohoe

Personal Philosophy within Professional Learning



Personal Philosophy within Professional Learning

A personal philosophy is a reflective statement that outlines the values, beliefs, aspirations and inspirations that guide one's work as an early childhood teacher. It is often shaped by personal and professional experiences, particularly those highlighted in an individual's personal educational autobiography. The themes and insights drawn from these reflections form the foundation and will underpin a personal philosophy.

Articulating an educational philosophy is a formative and ongoing process. It provides an opportunity to clarify motivations and beliefs and to articulate the values which act as a navigational compass. Brookfield points out that your educational philosophy is '... a distinctive organizing vision – a clear picture of why you are doing what you are doing that you can call up at points of crisis – [it] is crucial to your personal sanity and morale' (2006, p.16).

This reflective exercise helps early childhood teachers to reconnect with the sense of purpose which first drew them to the profession. It also services as a tool for evaluating the alignment between the degree of congruence between one's espoused theories (i.e. your beliefs, values, ideals, etc.) and one's theories-in-use, which are reflected in your day-to-day professional practice. The personal philosophy excerpts that follow offer valuable insights into the diverse and meaningful ways early childhood teachers approach their roles. They reflect their beliefs about early childhood education and care (ECEC), how children learn best and the role of the adult in supporting the unique potential of every child.

Personal Philosophy Excerpts

My philosophy of early childhood care and education stems from my basic belief that all life has value and that all people are equal. I believe that this should enable children to develop their love of learning, to become happy, confident, resilient, resourceful learners and problem solvers that will defend themselves and all people and life that share our planet. All children should be enabled to reach their full potential.

Mireille Connolly

My philosophy is to provide a safe, caring, educational and inclusive setting, where all children learn by being involved in playful experiences. Children learn by exploring and thinking, as children have a natural curiosity about the world around them. I believe that children are a great resource in planning their own activities and should be actively involved.

Eleanor Hawkins

Children learn best when engaging in activities that they choose. The role of the early childhood teacher should be to observe the child, understand their motivations and develop and extend activities around their interests. Relationships also play a significant role in children's learning. Parents are the primary educators and this is something I have come to understand more since becoming a parent last year. Early childhood teachers also play a significant role in children's learning as does the wider community. It is imperative that these relationships are nurtured and maintained to support a strong start to young children's learning.

Siobhan Browne

Children learn best in a comfortable, secure and stimulating environment where they know they are respected and genuinely cared for. They are active participants in their learning and have a natural curiosity about everything, nurturing this and encouraging them to explore and express themselves through play is key to their development. It is important to encourage them to develop at their own pace and in their own way, understanding that each child is unique.

Amy D'Alton

The role of the adult is central for young children's learning, as adults act as a guide to encourage, foster, support, and develop children's learning and facilitate quality experiences so children can become competent learners. The child learns best in a safe stimulating, purposeful, organised environment. Families are at the heart of the setting and parents play a vital role in a child's learning; therefore, it is important to create good strong, trusting relationships with them. The role of the home, parents, grandparents, family, environment and the community and quality relationships are all essential to a child's learning.

Fiona O'Sullivan

The relationship between early childhood teachers and parents is as important as the relationship with the children. I believe in open, trusting and positive relationships with parents, their input into their child's learning is valuable, they know their child best and we can learn a lot from them, always making sure they feel included and listened to. Inclusion has now become an important part of my philosophy as I gain more experience and learning, I strongly believe that every child regardless of their abilities has the right to early childhood education and should be welcomed and embraced.

Sabrina O' Brien



Inclusive Culture



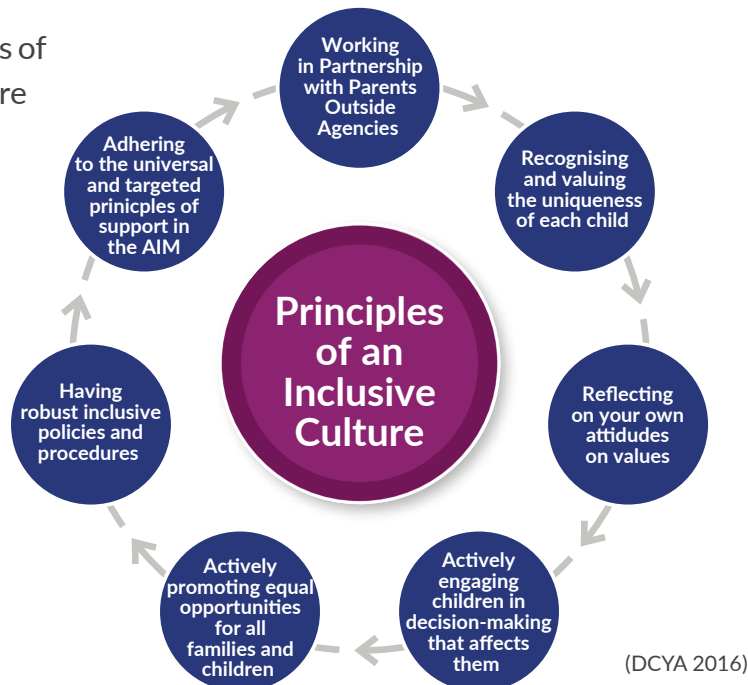
Inclusive Culture

“The promotion of effective leadership is vital to nurturing an inclusive culture.”

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2016, p.67.

The Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme aims to support INClusion COordinators (INCO) in developing an inclusive culture within their early learning and care (ELC) setting, and to enhance their skills in providing a variety of learning opportunities and experiences that support the inclusion and participation of all children. The principles of an inclusive culture that are embedded within the LINC Programme are underpinned by the philosophy of the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* (DCYA 2016), summarised in Figure 3. below.

Figure 3: Principles of an Inclusive Culture



The LINC Competency Framework (Mary Immaculate College (MIC) 2016-2025) includes eight key reflections for INClusion COordinators (INCOs) to consider when promoting an inclusive culture within their ELC setting. These reflections include: *all children are welcome; all children are valued; a focus is placed on promoting respectful interactions; there are high expectations for all children; partnership with parents/carers is actively promoted; difference is acknowledged and celebrated; the environment accommodates the needs of all children; and all policies are inclusive policies*. The Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings further reinforce the centrality of directing attention to the environment in creating and cultivating an inclusive culture (Grey et al. 2019; Ring et al. 2019; Ring and O’Sullivan 2021).

Through the reflections in the next section, we can see how an inclusive culture can be cultivated and sustained in an ELC setting.

Reflections on An Inclusive Culture

Welcome

Bine ati venit



Welkom



Fáilte



Witaj



خوش آمدید



Reflections on An Inclusive Culture

1) All children are welcome



All children are welcomed daily into warm and inviting environments. “Welcome” is displayed in many languages, reflecting the diversity of our community and promoting a sense of belonging. On arrival, children are offered engaging opportunities that spark curiosity and ensure every child feels included and ready to explore (Amy D’Alton).





Group displays such as “Who’s Hanging Out at Giggles” help to make children feel welcome and promote a sense of community among the group. Having children and early childhood teachers’ photographs on display re-enforces our inclusion policy which is, that everyone belongs and everyone is welcome in our playschool (Katie Dee).



We have many children from different cultures and backgrounds attend our setting who are using two or more languages. This is a sign saying welcome that I have made in those languages and is positioned outside the entrance into the setting (Sabrina O’Brien).



In our setting, we create a welcoming, calm, and familiar space by setting up engaging play provocations that reflect the emergent interests of all children, such as sand and dinosaurs. This helps every child feel included, supported, and excited to explore as they begin their day in our setting (Jeannine Sheehy).



Each morning, children place their photo on the Sunflower Room tree, creating a welcoming routine that celebrates every child's presence. This activity promotes a sense of belonging, and shows each child that they are valued, seen, and an important part of the setting (Maxine Ryan).

2) All children are valued



In our setting we created a birthday wall to ensure each child feels special and valued. It shows their photo, name, and birthday, so everyone can celebrate together. Children enjoy comparing ages and begin to understand the passing of time as they see birthdays change throughout the year. It is a simple way to support children's self-esteem and sense of belonging (Amy D'Alton).



We introduced a Story Box with hand puppets to encourage shared narrative play and foster peer interaction. Children eagerly created stories together building communication and confidence. This imaginative activity promoted collaboration, enhancing both social connection and creative expression in a fun learning environment (Orghialla Daly Holland).



We created personalised booklets with each child's photos, handprints, and interests, celebrating their identity and belonging. Children decorated their covers and enjoyed sharing them with each other. This values each child's uniqueness, voice, and sense of belonging, fostering pride and connection within our setting (Zurane Foure).





At Sunflowers Montessori School all children are valued and cherished equally and are respected as capable individuals who are central in their own learning and development. We scaffold and support the children in their journey as confident and competent learners to reach their full potential. The children create this family tree display in September to share a little about themselves with their friends (Mireille Connolly).



In our setting, we show children that they are important by displaying their artwork. This helps them feel proud, happy, and confident about what they create. It also shows that their ideas matter and are respected. Displaying their work helps build a positive, inclusive environment where every child feels valued and supported (Zurane Fouré).

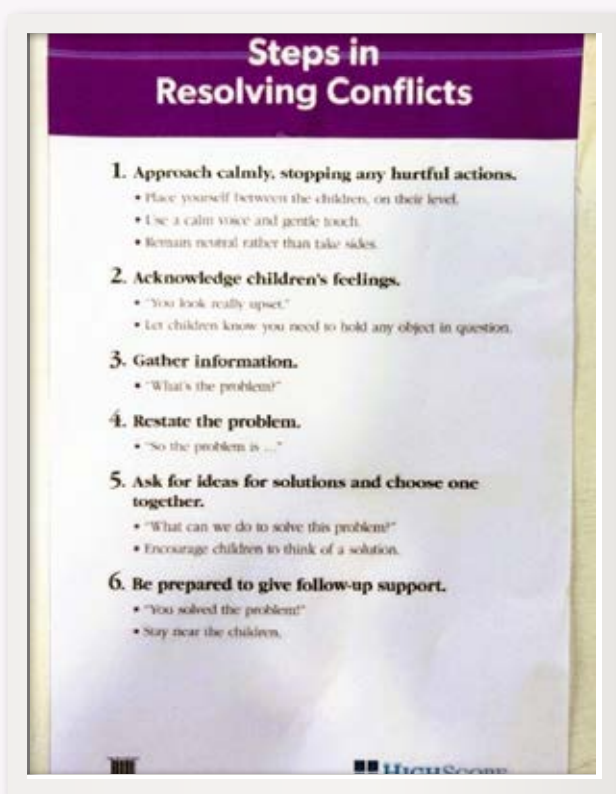
3) Respectful interactions are promoted



Respectful interactions are actively promoted through daily experiences and role modelling. Children are encouraged to support one another and through play show kindness, for example in this photo, where two children help each other carry a sign, showing teamwork, care, and learning how to get along with others (Ciara Donohoe).



Recently, some children showed kindness and empathy towards their friends. We acknowledge these moments with positive feedback and, when possible, capture a photo. These photos are added to our "Kindness Wall", celebrating respectful interactions and showing children that their caring actions are seen, valued, and appreciated by all (Orghialla Daly Holland).



In our setting, we help children to problem solve by using the High Scope six steps to conflict resolution. This strategy helps children to understand and talk about their feelings, to listen to each other and to reach a compromise. Children learn to make choices, to wait and to turn take alongside their peers (Jeannine Sheehy).



In our setting, sand timers are used as a visual strategy to support sharing, turn-taking, and respectful interactions. They help children wait patiently, resolve minor conflicts, and problem-solve independently. This strengthens self-regulation skills and supports the development of positive, respectful relationships with peers (Laura Firth).

4) There are high expectations for all children



We encourage children to take ownership of their learning by regularly asking, “What would you like to learn about?” Integrating their interests into the curriculum supports engagement and motivation. With high expectations for every child, this approach helps children to work confidently toward their individual goals and reach their full potential (Emma McCann).



We support all children to thrive by promoting confidence, independence, and care for the environment. Teaching handwashing and self-care builds healthy habits. Using Rufus books⁴ and posters makes learning fun and meaningful. We also teach recycling and sustainability early on, helping children develop responsibility and respect for themselves and the planet (Siobhan Browne).

4. <https://www.safefood.net/food-safety-kids/handwashing>



Using 'job' lanyards gives the children a sense of responsibility at tidy up time. As a mixed age group setting, the expectations of the group are different given the different age ranges. Using this approach at tidy up time gives the younger children the opportunity to learn from their older, more experienced peers (Katie Dee).



Children making potions and smoothies to sell in their café shows different ways of learning. Through play, they use their imagination, solve problems, and talk with others. These fun activities help children with numeracy and literacy, develop social skills, make choices, and explore new ideas in a way that makes sense to them (Ciara Donohoe).

5) Partnership with parents/carers is actively promoted



We work closely with families by inviting them into our setting to take part in activities with the children. This helps build trust and strong relationships. When families join in, children feel happy, proud, and supported. It also helps everyone feel part of a team, working together to help children learn and grow (Racheal Govan).



During induction, parents are introduced to our Wishing Wheel, where they share their hopes for their child's year ahead. We revisit these together throughout the year, encouraging open conversations. This deepens our understanding of each child and helps us support their holistic development (Maxine Ryan).



Parents are welcomed as primary educators and invited to actively engage in our setting. Family members often share their professions, cultures, and interests such as cooking, music, or yoga. Throughout the year, parents participate as our 'Secret Reader,' surprising children with a meaningful story special to them both (Ciara Donohoe).



In partnership with the local ETB [Education and Training Board], we developed 'Little Cookies' a baking class for parents and children to enjoy together. This hands-on Programme supports early learning in literacy, numeracy, and science. This initiative empowers parents as educators, strengthens community connections, and encourages family engagement in learning through fun, shared experiences (Laura Firth).



We build strong partnerships with parents through active involvement. Families contributed to our new outdoor garden by donating tyres and topsoil for flower beds. This meaningful collaboration supported the creation of an exciting outdoor play space, enriching children's experiences and development while strengthening the bond between our setting and the families we work with (Mary O'Brien).



6) Difference is acknowledged and celebrated



In our setting, we celebrate what makes each child special. Through play and activities like This is Me, children learn to share their stories, listen to others, and show kindness and respect. This helps them understand and value differences and build caring friendships in our diverse community (Jackie Durkan).



We use a variety of books in our reading corner to show that everyone is special and belongs. The stories reflect different cultures, families, and life experiences. This helps the children to learn about others, to feel proud of who they are, and to understand that differences are acknowledged and celebrated (Jeannine Sheehy).



Through self-portrait activities, children explore and express their unique features, helping them notice and appreciate differences in themselves and others. This learning experience encourages conversations about individuality, and it supports self-esteem, inclusion, and respect. It shows that every child is unique, and differences are something to celebrate and value (Emma McCann).



We have intentionally included a range of figurines that represent differences in our setting. These can lead to meaningful conversations with children about identity, inclusion, and respect. Through play and discussion, children are supported to observe, ask questions, and appreciate diversity, helping them understand and value the differences in others (Laura Firth).

7) The environment accommodates the needs of all children



Our indoor and outdoor environments offer clearly defined spaces that support holistic development through varied learning experiences. Equipped with diverse materials that encourage exploration and adventurous play. These areas are regularly rotated to reflect children's evolving interests and needs, ensuring engaging, inclusive, and responsive learning opportunities for all children (Amy D'Alton).





Our cosy corner provides a quiet, comfortable space where all children can relax, feel safe, and take a break when needed. It supports social and emotional well-being, helping children manage their feelings and feel calm. Soft furnishings, books, and gentle lighting make it welcoming and inclusive for every child in the setting (Maxine Ryan).



Through hands-on nature play, children explore and connect with the natural world. Planting seedlings into the ground offers rich sensory experiences while nurturing responsibility and curiosity. By caring for their pumpkin plants daily, children develop a sense of ownership, environmental awareness, and a deeper appreciation for nature (Teresa Callanan).



We introduced the AIM “Dark Den Cube⁵” indoors as part of our inclusive learning environment, offering all children a safe, calming space when feeling overwhelmed. Outdoors, we provide a cosy wigwam with soft textures for similar support. One child needing help with self-regulation uses both regularly, showing improved emotional well-being, independence, and smoother transitions (Fiona O’Sullivan).

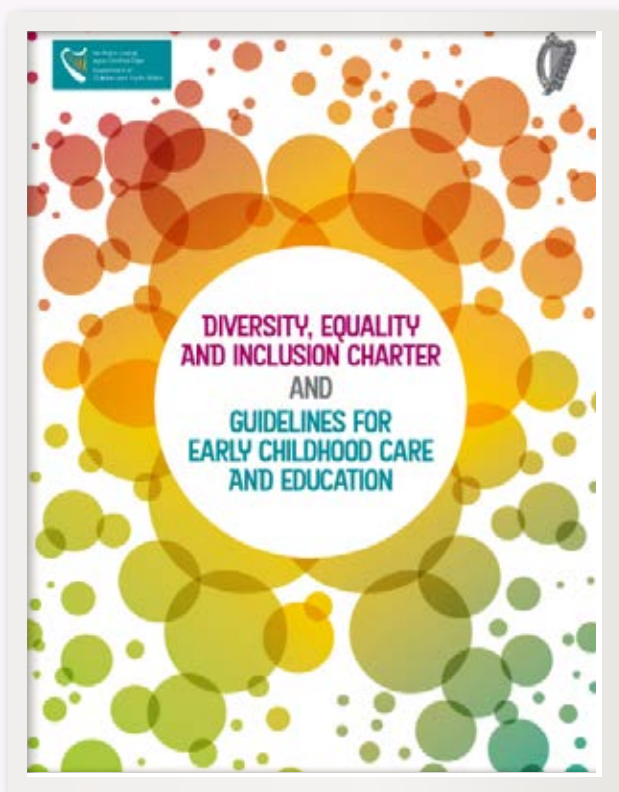
5. See: <https://aim.gov.ie/resources/dark-den-cube-pop-up-dark-den/>



Our outdoor environment, including our sensory wall, fairy houses, and wind chimes, supports the needs of all children by offering rich, multi-sensory experiences. These elements encourage exploration and imagination. They also promote inclusion by encouraging all children to engage, communicate, and learn through touch, sound, and creative play (Mandy O'Reilly).



8) All policies are inclusive policies



Our policies are reviewed annually to ensure they remain inclusive and up to date with any changes relevant to our sector. After completing the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter training, my setting updated our enrolment form which required 'mother' and 'father' details. The form has been changed to include 'parent/carer/guardian details' to show our acceptance of all family structures (Katie Dee).



Our Partnership with Parents policy emphasises the importance of involving families in the early years curriculum to support inclusion and belonging. By valuing parents as partners, we create meaningful opportunities for collaboration, ensuring all children's needs, interests, and backgrounds are reflected and celebrated within our setting (Sally Hartnett).

Footprints Early Years Ltd.

Policies and Procedures



Following a recent conversation with a parent, we learned that although our policies were provided in his spoken language, he was unable to read or write. This highlighted that written policies alone are not fully inclusive. In response, we have created an audio version to ensure better accessibility for all (Racheal Govan).



With the introduction of the second preschool year, we now welcome a wider age range of children, including children not yet toilet trained. Committed to inclusion, we have updated our policies and practices to support all ages and developmental stages. Adding nappy changing facilities is one way we have adapted our environment to meet the diverse needs effectively (Laura Firth).

Inclusive Practice



Inclusive Practice

“Leadership is a process that inspires people to work towards building confidence and supporting inclusive practice within ELC settings”.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2016, p. 68

Embedding inclusive practice within early learning and care (ELC) settings is beneficial for all children as it enables the removal of barriers and supports the participation of all children in the environment. Acknowledging and supporting each child's individual strengths, interests and needs is an essential element of developing inclusive practice (Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) 2015). Inclusive practice can be supported by having a whole-setting approach to developing a vision and policies for the ELC setting and ensuring that the vision and policies are collaborative and include the views of all staff members; parents and consider children as active citizens within the setting. Reflective practice is an important element of inclusive practice. Therefore, for the ELC setting's vision and policies to be effective they need to be translated into practice; monitored; reflected upon and updated in line with new developments that can further enhance inclusive practice (IDG 2015; DCYA 2016).

Exploring our own values and beliefs in relation to inclusive practice can support our professional learning and enhance our practice. The LINC Competency Framework (Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Consortium 2016-2025) includes five key reflections for INclusion COordinators (INCOs) to consider when promoting an inclusive practice within their ELC setting. These reflections include *transitioning to and from the setting is a positive experience for children, families and staff; support for children with additional needs is co-ordinated; staff members are encouraged to avail of continuing professional development opportunities; all staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the promotion of inclusive practice and the expertise of staff is acknowledged and utilised.*

Reflections on Inclusive Practice



Reflections on Inclusive Practice

1) Transitioning to and from the setting is a positive experience for children, families and staff



Each morning, parents help their child take their photo from a basket and place it in the “house” to show they are present. This simple routine supports transitions, sparks conversation about friends and early childhood teachers and helps parents feel connected by recognising their child’s peers and daily environment (Maxine Ryan).



To support smooth morning transitions for younger children, we’ve introduced a “surprise box”. New items are added daily, to spark curiosity and excitement. This engaging strategy fosters a positive start, easing separation from parents and/or carers, which in turn helps all children to feel secure, confident, and eager to begin their day (Teresa Callanan).



These dolls dressed in local primary school uniforms help children feel more familiar with the next step in their learning journey. They encourage role play, conversations, and questions about school. This supports emotional readiness, builds confidence, and makes the transition from preschool to primary school feel safe, exciting, and more familiar (Cathy Boyle).



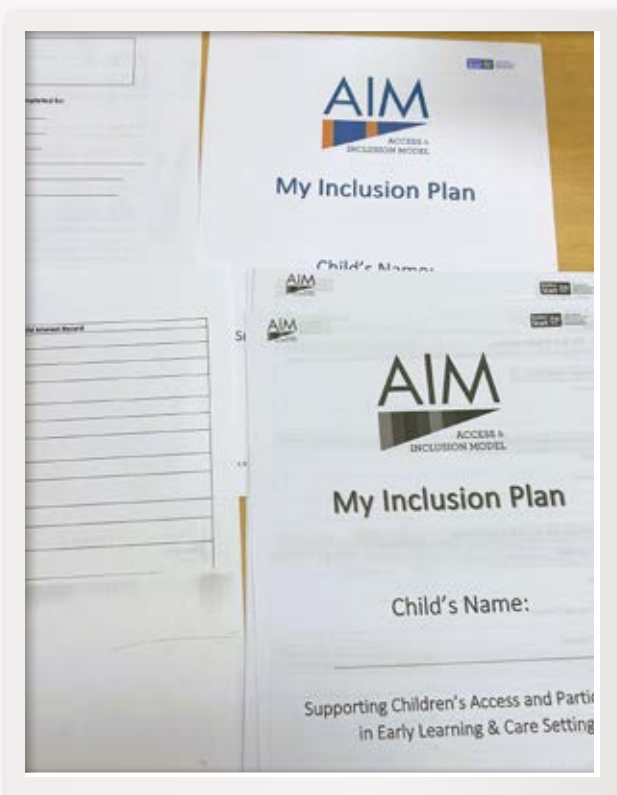
We collaborate with parents and the local primary school to support smooth transitions between home, preschool, and school. To assist this process, we provide a booklet titled My New School, helping children and families feel prepared and confident—and supporting the primary school in getting to know and welcome each child (Claire Walsh).



Mo Scéal⁶ documents support the transition of the child from preschool to primary school by sharing key information about each child's strengths, interests, and needs. This helps primary school teachers understand and plan for the child's learning and well-being, making the move to school smoother, more supportive, and centred around the individual child (Cathy Boyle).

6. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2025) Mo scéal, Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, <https://ncca.ie/en/early-childhood/mo-sceal/>, accessed 08 August 2025.

2) Support for children with additional needs is coordinated



Using the My Inclusion Plan⁷ and support from the Better Start Early Years Specialist at Level 4 of the Access and Inclusion Model, we work closely with parents to set clear, achievable goals. This partnership ensures each child receives tailored support throughout their early learning and care journey in our setting. (Fiona O'Sullivan).



We use a “first and then” chart⁸ to support a child with additional needs, helping them understand what is happening now and what comes next for example, “first snack, then outside time.” This visual support promotes routine and predictability and is coordinated between preschool and home to ensure consistency and effectiveness (Laura Leyden).

7. See: <https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2025/07/Access-and-Inclusion-Plan-My-Inclusion-Plan.pdf>

8. See: <https://www.betterstart.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Tip-Sheet-for-First-Then-Visual-Strategy.pdf>



Sensory toys from the AIM pack⁹ reflect how support for children with additional needs is coordinated. By working in conjunction with the Early Years Specialist and the family we identify each child's sensory needs and use these resources to promote regulation, engagement, and inclusion across the setting and the home environments (Claire Walsh).



Following guidance from my LINC tutor, I introduced a visual choice board to support a child in our setting who finds decision-making difficult. This strategy helps reduce anxiety and encourages independence by offering clear, manageable options, making daily transitions and choices easier (Jeannine Sheehy).

9. See: <https://aim.gov.ie/resources/>

3) Staff members are encouraged to avail of continuing professional development



Staff are encouraged to take part in continuous professional development (CPD) through training such as Lámh¹⁰, the Hanen¹¹ Programme, Marte Meo¹², and LINC+CPD¹³. We work with outside agencies to support learning. Staff are valued and supported through regular supervision and ongoing opportunities to build knowledge and skills (Cathy Boyle).



Continuing professional development is central to our setting's culture, with staff actively engaging in learning beyond required standards. This commitment to growth enhances quality and practice. A certificate wall proudly showcases our team's achievements, celebrating their dedication to upskilling and fostering a shared ethos of lifelong learning and professional excellence (Siobhan Browne).

10. See: <https://www.lamh.org/>

11. See: <https://aim.gov.ie/homepage/resources/hanen-and-lamh/hanen/>

12. See: <https://www.martemeo.com/en/>

13. See: <https://lincprogramme.ie/cpd-for-incos/>



Staff are encouraged to take part in CPD and recently completed Cultural Diversity Awareness training with ABC Start Right¹⁴. This training strengthened our understanding of inclusion and led to the addition of new resources. These resources now enhance our environment and help us to engage in respectful, culturally responsive interactions with children (Laura Firth).



Staff are actively encouraged to engage in continuous professional development. Many of the team have completed the sensory processing training and I have completed LINC and LINC+CPD. We regularly attend County Childcare Committee courses, including Child Protection, First Aid, and other relevant upskilling opportunities (Anne-Claire Gordon).

14. See: <https://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/prevention-partnership-and-family-support/i-am-a-parent/abc/>

4) All staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the promotion of inclusive practice



Displaying the INclusion COordinator (INCO) poster reminds our team of the importance of an inclusive culture, practice, and pedagogy. It highlights our shared responsibility to promote inclusion and create an inclusive environment. The poster supports consistent practice, encourages reflection, and strengthens our commitment to respecting and valuing each child (Laura Firth).



All staff understand their roles and responsibilities in promoting inclusive practice. I regularly share insights from the LINC Programme during team meetings, encouraging reflection and collaboration. This shared learning supports our daily practice and strengthens our collective ability to create a genuinely inclusive environment where every child feels valued, supported, and included (Tanwa Allinson).

Mission Statement

At Broadford Montessori Preschool, our mission is to provide a warm, welcoming, and inclusive environment where every child is valued, respected, and nurtured. Through a play-based, child-led curriculum grounded in Aistear, we support each child's unique journey of exploration, learning, and development. We partner with families and the wider community to foster a strong foundation for well-being, identity, belonging, communication, and thinking.

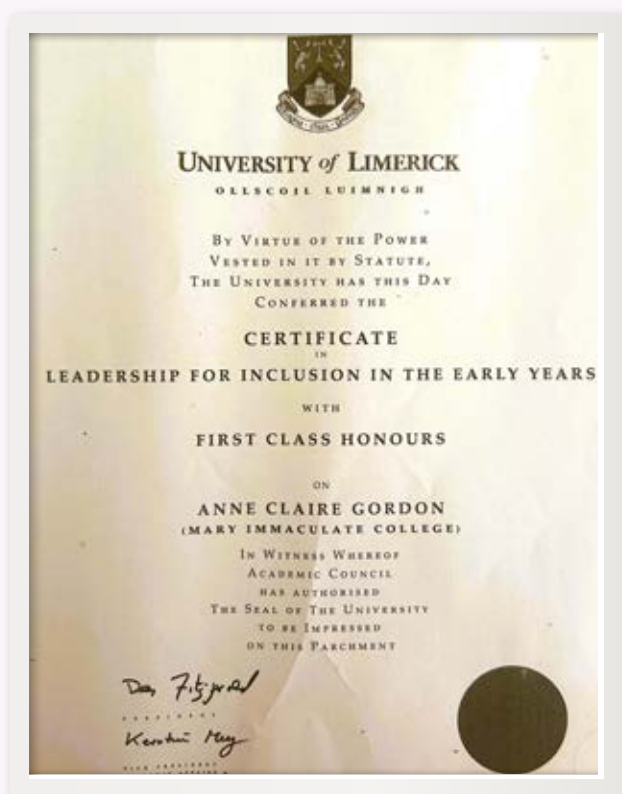
Our Ethos

- **Child-Centred**
We view each child as capable, curious, and full of potential. We follow their interests, celebrate their individuality, and support their voice in all aspects of daily life.
- **Play-Based Learning**
We believe play is central to how children learn and grow. Our setting offers rich, imaginative, and open-ended opportunities for discovery, problem-solving, and joy.
- **Inclusive and Equitable**
We honour the rights of all children to fully participate, regardless of ability, background, culture, or family structure. We embrace diversity and remove barriers to inclusion through Universal Design for Learning and reflective practice.
- **Warm, Respectful Relationships**
We create trusting, reciprocal relationships with children and families, grounded in empathy, respect, and active listening.

Our team shares a clear, united vision of the importance of inclusive practice. Recently, we used our staff induction as a collaborative training exercise, followed by a focused discussion during our staff meeting. This allowed us to revisit our roles and responsibilities, reinforcing our commitment to inclusive, reflective, and consistent practice (Emma McCann).



Early childhood teachers understand their roles and responsibilities in promoting inclusive practice. Our setting offers regular small group activities, such as art, to encourage meaningful interactions between children and their key person. These fun activities support communication, participation, and help ensure every child feels included and valued (Amy D'Alton).



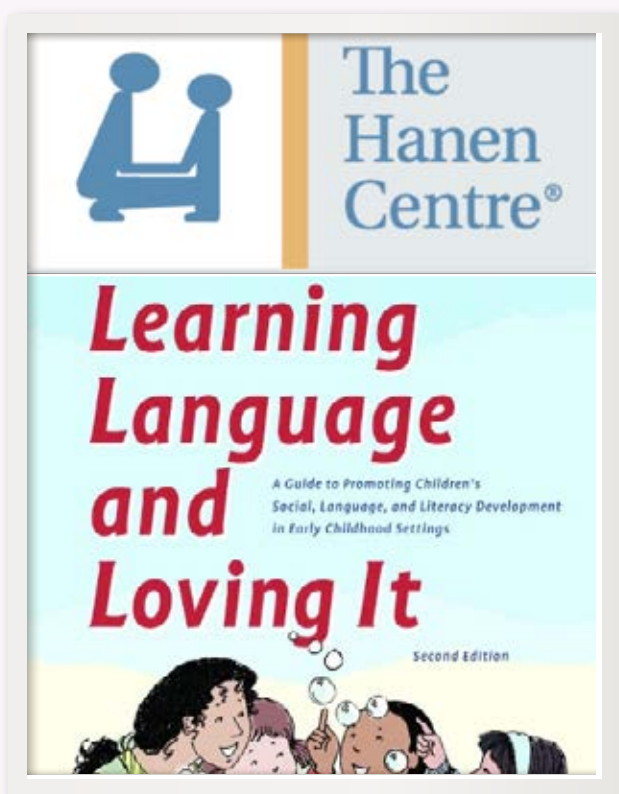
I shared my learning from the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme with my team to promote inclusive practice. I encouraged open discussions, shared key strategies, and identified roles and responsibilities. This helped create an understanding and commitment to inclusion in our setting (Anne-Claire Gordon).

5) The expertise of all staff is acknowledged and utilised



One of our team members brings a strong passion for nature and the environment, which enriches our outdoor learning experiences. We observe seasonal changes, discover local wildlife and plants, and explore ways to protect and conserve our environment. This fosters a deep respect for nature, both locally and globally, in our children (Mireille Connolly).





A Key Person in the wobbler room completed Learning Language and Loving It¹⁵ by The Hanen Centre, enhancing our communication strategies. Her expertise is now acknowledged and utilised as she leads the team in applying the Hanen approach, with the guidebook added to our reference library for ongoing support (Soirse Doheny).



We actively encourage the team to share their skills and interests within daily learning. One early childhood teacher introduced a flower bulb, sparking rich learning about plant growth. Children observed its transformation into a beautiful flower, with the experience extended through related activities, highlighting how the expertise of the team enriches our curriculum and inspires meaningful engagement (Mandy O' Reilly).

15. See: <https://www.hanen.org/programs/learning-language-and-loving-it>



The expertise of all is valued and actively used to enhance our environment. One of our early childhood teachers applied their skills to design and build a practical trolley, providing organised storage and hanging space for children's outdoor gear and wellies. This helpful idea makes things easier to access and supports children's independence in the outdoor environment (Linda Madden).



As a team, we often submit learning stories to Early Childhood Ireland¹⁶ to showcase quality practice and highlight the enriching experiences offered to children each day. Celebrating award successes together fosters a strong sense of pride and professional fulfilment, as early childhood teachers feel their dedication and contributions are truly valued and recognised (Ciara Donohoe).

16. See: <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/>

The Role of Personal Pedagogy within Professional Learning



The Role of Personal Pedagogy within Professional Learning

Professional learning can often be prompted by policy imperatives and/or regulatory requirements. Yet at the heart of meaningful development lies something deeply personal: the early childhood teacher's own pedagogy. A personal pedagogy refers to the unique blend of values, beliefs, experiences and practices which shape how early childhood teachers understand teaching and learning. It is not static, it evolves through co-creation, reflection and engagement with both theory and practice, working individually and with a team.

Creating a personal pedagogy is a vital part of professional identity formation. As Sewell (2020) discusses, choosing and implementing a pedagogical approach is shaped by understanding what it means to teach authentically and confidently. Through students on the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme engaging with reflecting on their personal pedagogy, it allows them to articulate their early childhood teacher voice, agency and vision.

When early childhood teachers engage with their personal pedagogy, it invites critical reflection on the relationship between belief and practice. Through this reflective process early childhood teachers begin to see how their past experiences have shaped their pedagogical choices, deepening their understanding of teaching and opening space for change, creativity and growth (Choi 2013; Sewell 2020).

O'Sullivan and Ring (2026) suggest that pedagogy in being equated with how we teach emerges as a multi-faceted ever-evolving concept influenced by four interrelated elements: the child's interests and experiences; the prescribed curriculum framework; the broader cultural context and the educator's beliefs about education. When these elements are intentionally explored, they help educators to make sense of their professional identity and inform their everyday practices.

The personal pedagogy excerpts below offer insights into how early childhood teachers reflect on and articulate their evolving pedagogy. These narratives reveal how experiences, values and challenges influence their teaching, bringing theory to life. They demonstrate that personal pedagogy is not a static concept, but a lived and dynamic practice which is continually shaped and reshaped by the realities of early childhood education.

My Personal Pedagogy Excerpts



My Personal Pedagogy Excerpts

My personal pedagogy is that all children are natural learners, each child is a unique individual with their own strengths, interests, abilities, needs and experiences. Children learn about things that interest them at their own pace. Observation and documentation help us to have a better understanding of each child. Children have a fundamental need to be with other people. Their early interactions with others lay the foundations for their relationships later in life. Showing respect and love when you care for children is very important and supporting them in a way that allows them to make their own decisions about what, how and when they learn.

Margaret O'Sullivan

I believe that children learn best when the learning is hands-on and their curriculum is reflective of their emerging interests. I always strive to ensure our curriculum is responsive to how the children are feeling, what is happening in their home lives and what individual needs each child may have. These needs change day-to-day, and my team and I aim to be in-tune with their needs to ensure that all children have the opportunity to engage, learn and reach their full potential under our care.

Emma McCann

I believe every child is unique and deserves to be nurtured in an inclusive, loving environment where they can develop at their own pace and be themselves. Creating a positive, creative space for exploration and learning is essential. I see collaboration with families, colleagues, and external professionals as vital to supporting all children. Respectful, supportive relationships are at the heart of my practice, ensuring all children feel valued and empowered. Through careful observation, we can respond meaningfully to children's interests and foster confidence and positivity. Above all, I want children to leave our service with lasting feelings of happiness, respect, and being truly seen, feelings that will support their future learning and self-belief.

Fiona Campbell

Inclusive Pedagogy



Inclusive Pedagogy

Pedagogy “refers to all the educator’s actions or work in supporting babies, toddlers and young children’s learning and development. It infers a negotiated, respectful and reflective learning experience for all involved.”

Government of Ireland (Gol) 2024a, p.32

Inclusive pedagogy can therefore be viewed as early childhood teachers considering each child’s strengths, interests and needs when planning for children’s learning and development. It is underpinned by the principle that all children regardless of ability, background or identity, have the right to fully participate, belong and reach their full potential in inclusive early learning environments. Inclusive early childhood education is not only about access but also about ensuring active participation, engagement and meaningful learning for all children (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) 2017). Through early childhood teachers embedding inclusive pedagogical practices in their early learning and care (ELC) setting, they can critically reflect on their practices, adapt their environments and build meaningful relationships with children, families and other professionals to ensure that every child is empowered, valued and supported to thrive.

The Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Competency Framework (LINC Consortium 2016-2025) outlines twelve key reflections to guide INclusion COordinators (INCOs) in fostering an inclusive pedagogy within their ELC setting. *Children’s experiences are planned with the needs of all children in mind; Strategies are in place to promote the participation of all children in learning; A range of appropriate pedagogical approaches are in place to support the holistic development of all children; All children’s communication and interaction is promoted; All children’s views are valued and responded to; Early identification of children who require additional support is central to practice; A variety of approaches to observation, recording and assessment is in place; Early years educators plan, implement and evaluation in partnership with children, parents and relevant others; Positive relationships are understood and nurtured; Children’s specific assessed needs are understood as signposts; and External assistance is elicited where required.*

Reflections on Inclusive Pedagogy



Reflections on Inclusive Pedagogy

1) Children's experiences are planned with the needs of all children in mind



All play experiences are thoughtfully planned to meet the needs of every child. Activities are based on children's emergent interests, allowing each child to actively choose and lead their own learning. This inclusive approach ensures all children can fully engage in meaningful learning (Jackie Durkan).



Taking children to the post office builds strong community bonds and gives real-life learning experiences. The trip is carefully planned to meet the needs of all children, ensuring everyone can take part. It supports confidence, social skills, and helps children feel connected, included, and valued in their local community (Racheal Govan).



In our orchard, we observe children daily to plan engaging activities that reflect their interests. One activity is apple picking, which encourages hands-on learning, exploration, and teamwork. These experiences spark further learning opportunities by encouraging children to ask questions, explore new ideas, and build on what they already know (Eleanor Hawkins).





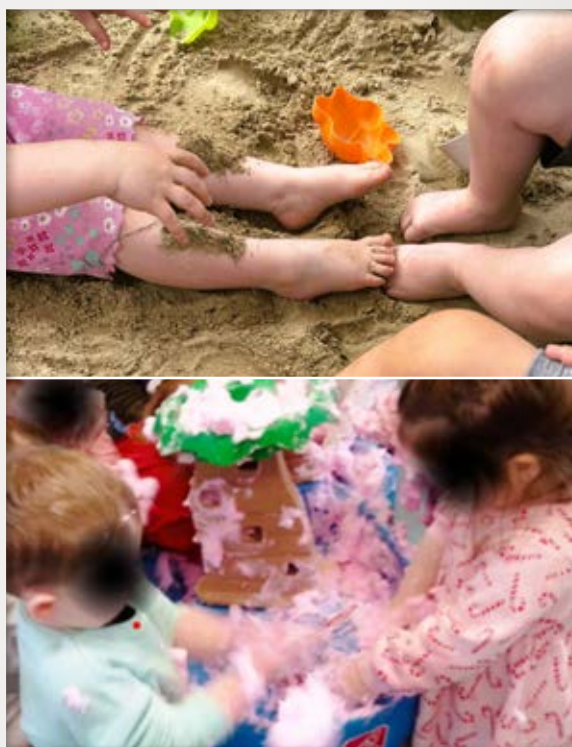
By introducing the experience of hatching chickens, Early childhood teachers show that children's learning is thoughtfully planned. It encourages curiosity, care, and communication through real-life experiences that spark interest, deepen knowledge, and ensure every child feels involved and included (Fiona Campbell).



2) Strategies are in place to promote the participation of all children in learning



A cosy quiet area outside promotes the participation of all children in learning by offering a calm, comfortable space for reflection, regulation, or one-on-one interactions. It supports children who may feel overwhelmed in busy environments, ensuring they have a safe place to re-engage in learning at their own pace (Amy D'Alton).



Sensory play is key to inclusive practice, and through hands-on activities, children learn about the world around them, build their thinking skills, and grow in confidence. These experiences support children to feel calm, to express their feelings, and take part in learning in their own way (Mandy O'Reilly).

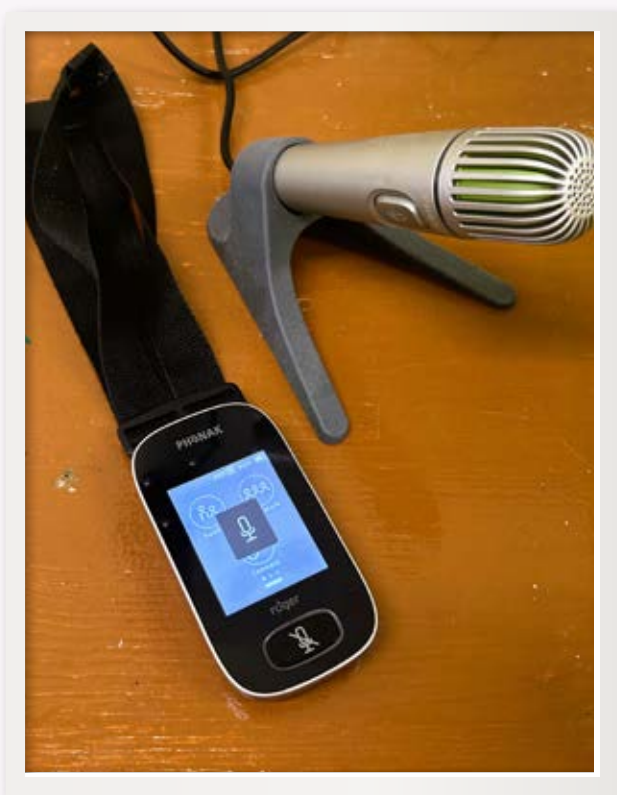


We created choice boards from the Better Start¹⁷ Resources to promote participation by giving all children the opportunity to select the activities they want to engage in. This strategy supports communication, empowering all children to express their preferences and actively participate (Laura Leyden).



We created a tactile communication board to support a preverbal child's self-expression. By matching coloured buttons to corresponding photos, the child can communicate choices and intentions. This interactive tool encourages engagement, supports understanding, and promotes early communication skills (Margaret O'Sullivan).

17. See: <https://www.betterstart.ie/>



We support a child who has a hearing impairment using assistive technologies such as hearing aids, sound amplification devices, and microphones during group times. We work closely with the family and relevant professionals to ensure that the child's individual needs are met, creating an inclusive environment where they can reach their full potential (Zurane Foure).

3) A range of appropriate pedagogical approaches is used to support the holistic development of all children



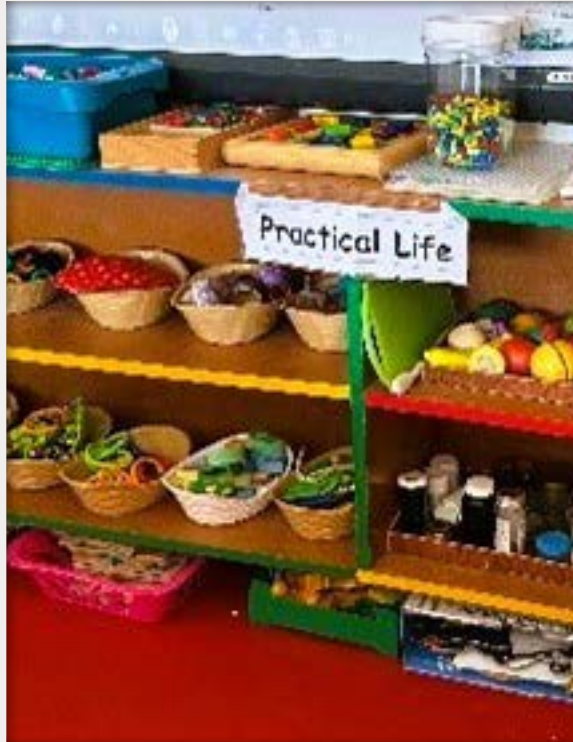
In our setting, the environment acts as the third teacher, inspiring curiosity and exploration. Early childhood teachers use respectful conversations, encouragement, and scaffolding to support each child's learning. By using varied pedagogical approaches, we promote holistic development, ensuring every child feels supported and valued (Sabrina O'Brien).





To support children's holistic development, we use varied pedagogical approaches, including monthly visits from the local library. This responds to children's interests in books, allowing them to choose and share stories with their peers. With the children we create story boxes based on children's favourite books. This nurtures language, social skills, and a lifelong love of reading (Amy D'Alton).





Children engage in active learning through a range of pedagogical approaches, including the Montessori curriculum and play-based methods. They explore, use their imagination, and enjoy nature. This helps them feel curious, become more independent, and love discovering new things. They grow in a caring place that values how each child learns in their own special way (Margaret O'Sullivan).





The children discovered bugs in the garden, which inspired them to build a bug hotel. They worked together to find and use loose materials like sticks, blocks, timber, leaves, and stones. This hands-on activity encouraged curiosity, creativity, and teamwork, while also growing their love and respect for nature (Linda Madden).



The mud kitchen offers open-ended play for all children. It encourages creativity, sensory exploration, and social interaction. Children can mix, pour, and pretend together, building language, problem-solving, and fine motor skills through fun, hands-on, and playful learning experiences outdoors (Fiona Campbell).

4) Play and playful learning are key features of practice for all children



Play and playful learning are essential in early childhood, encouraging creativity, curiosity, and social skills. Messy play and hands-on experiences allow children to explore, experiment, and express themselves freely. These activities help children grow in all areas, making learning fun, interesting, and interactive for every child (Racheal Govan).





When children use loose parts, they have many opportunities to create and explore using their imagination. These materials help them solve problems, work together, and learn through play. In this photo, the children with the early childhood teachers built a car using only loose parts, showing how simple things can lead to great ideas and fun (Ciara Donohoe).





Using tyres in our outdoor environment helps children build balance, coordination, and confidence. They enjoy pretending tyres are bridges or stepping stones, which sparks their imagination. This fun play supports physical skills, social interaction, and problem-solving, making learning active and enjoyable (Siobhan Browne).



Play areas are thoughtfully designed with rich, open-ended materials that spark creativity. Children transform spaces into trains, boats, beds, pirate ships—even happy robots. Their imaginative play is diverse and dynamic, showing how well-equipped environments inspire endless possibilities. Hands-on experiences nurture creativity, encouraging children to explore, invent, and reimagine the world around them (Mary O’ Brien).



Playing outdoors on a rope swing helps children learn through fun and adventure. It encourages them to take safe risks, make choices, and build resilience. Children develop coordination, balance, and spatial awareness as they swing and climb. They also use their imagination, solve problems, and enjoy playing with others (Sabrina O'Brien).

5) All children's communication and interactions are promoted



All children's communication and interactions are actively supported in our setting. Inspired by knowledge gained on the LINC Programme¹⁸, we created a puppet stage to help a shy child engage with peers. Using puppets to act out their own stories, all children are encouraged to express themselves confidently and creatively through play (Margaret O'Sullivan).



18. See: <https://lincprogramme.ie/>



We use Lámh¹⁹ to support communication and help all children feel included. One child uses Lámh, along with sounds and gestures. After completing Lámh training, we began using Lámh signs in our songs, our play, and within our daily routine. The child also uses Lámh at home, helping to build communication between the setting and home (Soirse Doheny).



Many children in our setting speak English as a second language. To support them, early childhood teachers wear lanyards with photos of objects paired with corresponding Lámh signs. We taught these signs to all children, helping everyone communicate their needs more effectively and fostering a more inclusive environment (Orghialla Daly Holland).

19. See: <https://www.lamh.org/>



In our setting, we provide children with nursery rhyme choice cards to select a song or a rhyme. This encourages communication and interaction by allowing all children to express their preferences. It supports decision-making, builds confidence, and ensures each child's voice is included, helping them feel valued and involved in group activities (Racheal Govan).



Using a communication board and AAC lanyards supports all children's communication and interaction in both indoor and outdoor environments. These strategies promote inclusion by offering visual support, encouraging children to express their needs, to make choices, and to engage with their peers and adults, building confidence and independence (Anne-Claire Gordon).

6) All children's views are valued and responded to



As part of our weekly planning, each Monday morning we sit with the children to hear their ideas for the week ahead. They share their thoughts using marks, drawings, or words. This approach values every child's voice, encourages creativity and choice, and ensures planning reflects their interests and supports inclusive, child-led learning (Linda Madden).



A tent with soft furnishings creates a calm, quiet space where children can relax and rest. Providing ear defenders and a cosy environment highlight that their needs and feelings are being responded to. This sensory-friendly area supports children's well-being and their emotional regulation (Mireille Connolly).



All children's views are valued, respected, and thoughtfully responded to. They are offered rich opportunities for messy and creative play, encouraging self-expression and exploration. Children are invited to display their artwork on the messy area notice board, celebrating their individuality (Orghialla Daly Holland).



We actively value and respond to every child by listening to their views and involving them in decisions. All children are respected and included. For example, children collaborated to create a river in the sandpit using loose parts and natural materials, demonstrating their voices are heard, encouraged, and supported through playful experiences (Sabrina O' Brien).



In partnership with the child, parents, and early childhood teachers, we supported a child experiencing difficulties with peer interaction by building on their interest in sensory play and dinosaurs. This approach created meaningful opportunities for the child to engage with other children who shared a similar interest, encouraging positive and enjoyable interactions (Sally Hartnett).

7) Early identification of children who require additional supports is central to practice

10. Parental consent and signature if sharing information

Child's Name: _____

I/We provide consent for the information in this Plan to be shared with other ELC settings, Primary School, Póblaí, or the National Council for Special Education in order to support my/our child's inclusion in their ELC setting and their transition to primary school.

- ◆ Mo Scéal – Moving from Pre-school to Primary ☐
- ◆ My Inclusion Plan - Voice of the Child - Transition into Primary School ☐
- ◆ Relevant Goals ☐
- ◆ Professional Reports ☐
- ◆ Other ☐

Parent/Guardian 1

Name: _____

Relationship to child: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Parent/Guardian 2 (Optional)

Name: _____

Relationship to child: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Early identification of children needing extra support is central to our practice. We work closely with parents to complete the My Inclusion Plan and gain their consent to apply for support through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). This ensures a shared approach to meeting each child's individual needs (Cathy Boyle).

In our setting, the early identification of children needing support is central to our practice. For the past ten years, we have implemented the Early Talk Boost²⁰ Programme, using Tizzy the Tiger to engage children in fun songs, stories, and activities. The Programme is now embedded in our setting, with all children taking part and showing measurable progress in language and confidence. We use the Equal Start tracker²¹ to document the children's progress and achievements (Laura Firth).



20. See: <https://whatworks.gov.ie/hub-search/report/47/ParentChild+>

21. See: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9d498-equal-start/?referrer=https://www.gov.ie/EqualStart/>



In our setting, we used a buddy system to support a child who was finding it difficult to join in free play. Paired with a peer who also loved messy play, the child felt encouraged to join activities, have fun, and make friends. Peer support helps children build friendships and feel included (Linda Madden).

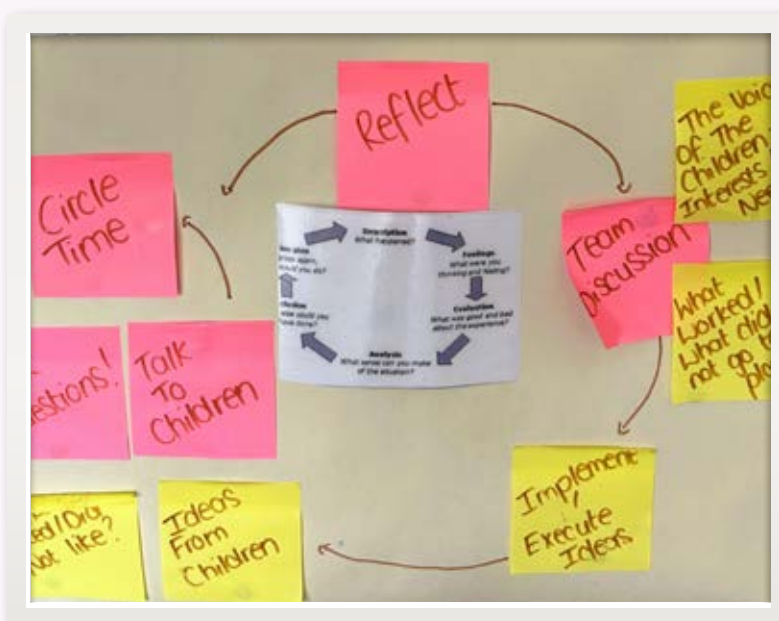


In our parents' handbook, we include information on the Access and Inclusion Model to support early identification of children requiring additional support. This encourages partnership with parents, ensures each child's needs are met, and allows tailored supports to be introduced when needed, promoting an inclusive environment for all (Mireille Connolly).

8) A variety of approaches to observation, recording and assessment is in place



We use a variety of methods to observe, record, and assess children's learning, including the Child Paths²² app, photographs, and written notes. Sticky notes are placed around the rooms for quick, on-the-spot documentation, allowing us to capture important moments without interrupting the children's play (Siobhan Browne).

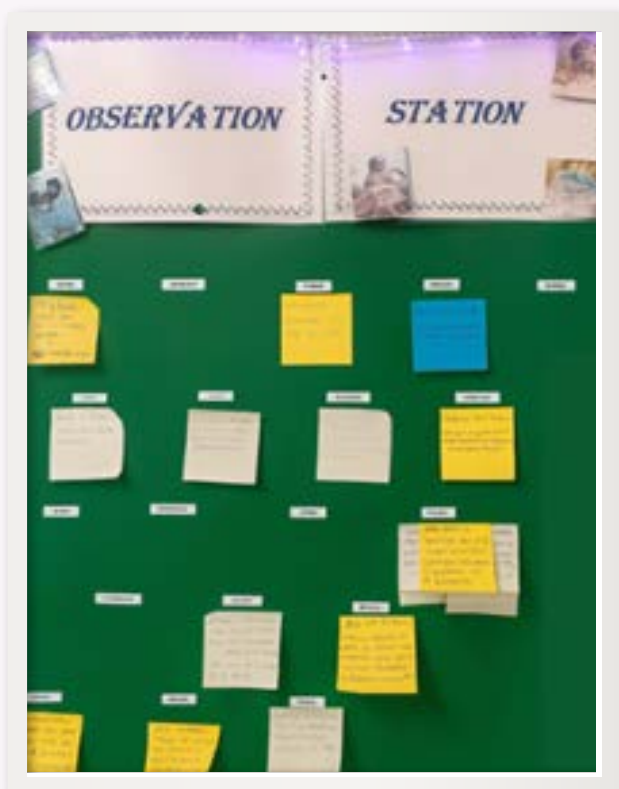


In our setting, we use a variety of observation, recording, and assessment methods to understand each child's learning. We reflect on these observations, include the child's voice, and consider what worked well. This helps us extend children's learning by planning meaningful learning experiences that support their interests, strengths, and development (Jackie Durkan).

22. See: <https://app.childpaths.ie/>



We use a range of observation, recording, and assessment methods to support each child's learning. From September to June, children compile personal journals, choosing what to include. These journals, regularly shared with parents, feature learning stories that assess and extend individual interests through small group activities and guided support (Eleanor Hawkins).



Using an Observation Station allows early childhood teachers to document each child's interests through daily observations. Using these anecdotal notes helps identify children's emerging interests and plan fun and meaningful activities that reflect what the children enjoy. This supports all children to participate in play (Soirse Doheny).

9) Early years educators plan, implement and evaluate children's learning in partnership with parents



At the weekend one of the children attended a fundraising car wash event with his family. He was very excited to share his news with everyone and wondered if he could set up a similar event in the preschool. Early childhood teachers and children sourced sponges, brushes, a hose and soap liquid for bubbles and the car wash was created (Linda Madden).

My Achievements At Home

Learning is not just done in school, lots of learning goes on at home too. We love to hear about it so please draw or stick a picture here and tell us a bit about it 😊

Date _____ Name _____

We provide “My Achievements at Home” pages for parents to share their child's news and achievements. This supports families who may not have time to chat at drop-off or pick-up. Early childhood teachers use this shared information to plan learning experiences with children and parents, helping shape our emergent curriculum together (Emma McCann).



Sharing children's artwork in learning journals with parents/carers celebrates each child's progress and creativity. It encourages parent/carer involvement in understanding their child's interests. It helps early childhood teachers plan, implement, and evaluate children's learning, strengthening connections between home and setting (Laura Cajal Gómez).



Mr. Cuddles goes home with a different child each weekend, creating a special bond between home and our setting. Parents share photos and notes about their activities with the family, helping us learn about each child's interests. We use this to build on their experiences and support their learning and development (Jeannine Sheehy).

10) Positive relationships are understood and nurtured



At Sunflowers, positive relationships are actively understood and nurtured through various approaches. One key method is using books that explore topics like friendship, emotions, diverse family structures, additional needs, and cultural celebrations. These stories provide a foundation for further learning through activities such as art, cooking, outings, and games (Mireille Connolly).



Positive relationships are nurtured and respected, creating a supportive and inclusive environment where children feel safe, valued, and connected. The children build trust, show empathy, and learn to help and encourage one another. These strong social connections promote confidence, cooperation, and a sense of belonging (Sabrina O'Brien).



Incorporating simple mindfulness techniques such as yoga helps nurture positive relationships. These practices support emotional development, self-regulation, and empathy, creating a calm environment. Through mindful movement, children develop a stronger and a greater understanding of themselves and others, supporting overall well-being and inclusion (Mandy O'Reilly).



Children enjoyed a visit to Grandad's Garden, where they picked fresh vegetables to bring to preschool. They helped make soup and talked about Grandad. This helped them feel connected to home and each other. The activity showed how people care, share, and work together, helping children build kind relationships (Linda Madden).

11) Children's specific assessed needs are understood as 'signposts' that support children's learning and development

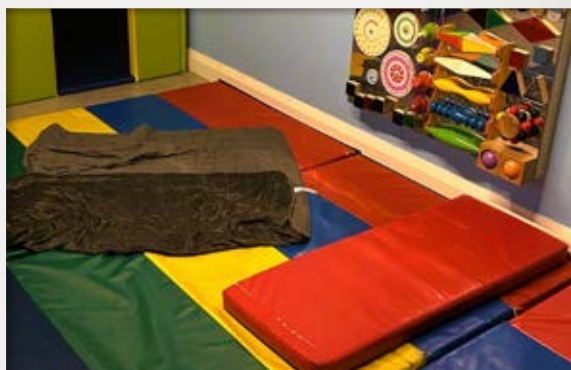


The key person approach²³ ensures each child's assessed needs are understood and responded to with care. By building strong relationships, the key person can provide support, to ensure the provision of meaningful learning experiences and the promotion of each child's, confidence and emotional well-being (Maxine Ryan).



A child enjoys sensory activities such as shaving foam, gloop, and playdough but also seeks oral sensory input. To support safe engagement during sensory play, and in collaboration with their family, we provide alternative sensory trays with materials like jelly, yoghurt, or cereals, tailored to the child's needs (Katie Dee).

23. See: <https://www.nurturingskills.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Key-Person-2.pdf>



We have a child who finds it difficult to self-regulate during transitions. By recognising this assessed need, we provide movement breaks and access to the sensory room. This supports his emotional regulation by offering time and space away from the busy environment, acting as a signpost to enhance his learning, development, and overall well-being (Fiona O'Sullivan).



We value every child by actively listening to their views, understanding their individual needs, and involving them in decision-making. All children are respected, supported, and included. Where appropriate, individual visual schedules are created to provide additional support, ensuring each child feels heard, understood, and empowered in their learning journey (Sabrina O'Brien).

12) External assistance is elicited where required to support the setting in meeting children's additional needs



Working with the Better Start Early Years Specialist²⁴ helps us support children with additional needs by using strategies like a First and Then board, choice board, and daily visual schedule. These help children understand what's happening, feel calmer, and make choices, creating a more inclusive learning environment (Katie Dee).



Early childhood teachers in our setting take part in Lámh²⁵ training through Better Start²⁶ to help support children with additional needs. This outside training gives us the tools and confidence to support all children. By using Lámh signs, we help children communicate, feel included, and take part fully in everyday learning (Jeannine Sheehy).

24. See: <https://www.betterstart.ie/>

25. See: <https://www.lamh.org/>

26. See: <https://www.betterstart.ie/>



Attending training, accessing resources, and receiving expert guidance through ABC Start Right Limerick²⁷ helps us support all children. The Little Voice Programme, delivered with Speech and Language Therapists, has greatly supported communication development. This external support strengthens our inclusive practice and helps every child to reach their full potential (Laura Firth).



Type 1 diabetes webinar for teachers and SNA's

A child in my setting has type 1 diabetes and requires one-to-one support to manage her blood sugar levels and monitor her food intake to ensure accurate insulin intake at lunchtime. With parental consent, we accessed Level 7 AIM support, and her key person completed Type 1 Diabetes training at Crumlin Children's Hospital to provide informed care (Katie Dee).

27. See: <https://www.paulpartnership.ie/abc-start-right/>

Concluding Reflections

This collection of reflections offers a rich tapestry of voices, experiences, and insights from early childhood teachers who are deeply committed to inclusive practice. Through their personal autobiographies, philosophies and pedagogies, we see how inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy are not fixed strategies, but instead a lived, evolving approach grounded in respect, equity, and a belief in the potential of every child.

These reflections demonstrate how early childhood teachers draw upon their values, relationships and observations to create environments that are responsive and nurturing, where difference is not only recognised but celebrated. We are reminded that inclusion is not merely a goal to be achieved, but a mindset which is cultivated through continuous learning, critical reflection and meaningful collaboration with children, families and external professionals.

As this collection of reflections comes to a close, we invite all early childhood teachers to engage in reflection on their own personal stories and practices with renewed curiosity and commitment to inclusion. Allow these reflections to serve as a reminder that inclusive pedagogy begins with the courage to listen, adapt and to believe in the power of relationships as the foundation of transformative early learning.

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Masterpieces -

Every child is an artist
- Pablo Picasso



